

The growing trend of outsourcing the enrollment process to an online administrative service provider brings the added benefit of allowing benefit professionals to spend less time doing paperwork and data entry, and more time on ensuring good benefits participation levels and well-educated employ-

ees. The payoff is already starting to show.

"One of the things we're seeing is the types of questions we're getting on consumer-driven health plans are much more thoughtful because we spent a lot of time on education last year, so workers have more of an understanding about how

they work," says Robin Downey, head of product development at Aetna. "They really do get it now."

What's more, these tools are available to companies in all sizes and in all industries. Companies using online enrollment and decision support tool providers include blue and gray

as well as white-collar workers. Employease handled several municipalities this year, providing online enrollment services for firefighters, policemen and sanitation workers alike.

"If you think about it from a benefits professional standpoint, in the old way of doing things you would fill out the paper-

work for all the employees, and your job around enrollment was very transaction and processing oriented," Jeff Beinke, Employease vice president, explains. "Today, the technology and tools we provide allow HR professionals to be much more consultative and less transactional." — S.B.

# How to make the most of employee surveys

By Leah Carlson

Like most forms of communication, employee attitude surveys only appear to be simple. In fact, developing and analyzing employee surveys require benefit managers to reason like statisticians and react like sociologists, which is no small feat.

However, the payoff for a well-crafted, well-conducted survey is great. Companies can achieve better retention, better communication throughout the workforce and the opportunity to make the benefits structure more efficient. Employee satisfaction surveys also can build trust between managers and workers if employees feel they are being heard.

"The primary benefit of doing an employee survey is to provide an opportunity for the employee to give feedback to the organization," Dave Snyder, senior vice president at Aon Consulting, comments. "The opportunity to provide some structured feedback can be a very, very good thing."

However, with increasing attention on soaring health care costs, many employers aren't focusing on surveys. The number of employers conducting employee satisfaction surveys has dropped in recent years, mostly because of cost concerns, according to Michael Carter, vice president of the Hay Group, a Philadelphia-based consulting firm.

Snyder estimates that at least 50% of companies conduct employee satisfaction surveys, but many don't ask specific questions about benefits and compensation for fear of opening the proverbial can of worms. "It's a very delicate time in that arena," he observes.

## Best practices

Survey questions should be specific, unambiguous, neutral and not personal enough to make the respondent identifiable, experts say. "The wording of the



**Maria Ferris, manager of work-life and women's initiatives for IBM, says employee surveys help IBM understand workers' needs and demographics.**

questions has to be thought through very carefully, so it's very vanilla, very objective and also respectful of the respondent," Snyder notes.

Carter advises employers to frame questions in a way that makes workers prioritize and rank options, so they understand that most things are a trade-off.

Jim Klein, president of the American Benefits Council, stresses keeping questions germane.

"The employer doesn't want to ask

personal information that's not relevant to the purpose of the survey," he advises. "Steer clear of things that might be interesting to know but are irrelevant to the employer's mission in sponsoring employee benefits."

In addition, experts recommend avoiding misleading questions.

"You don't want to ask questions that you already know the answers to, and you don't want to ask questions that are likely to raise expectations that you can't fulfill," says Ted Hill, assistant vice pres-

ident and investment products.

Employee satisfaction surveys present a few privacy and legal issues for employers to consider. Of course, no company wants to be sued by employees who claim they were fired because they submitted negative comments or because they admitted to having a certain disease. Klein advises companies to deal only with aggregated data. "Any information like that has to be kept confidential. It's probably best that the employer doesn't receive it back in a way that's identifiable," he says.

Surveys lose their value when workers view them as a privacy invasion. With that in mind, Hill's firm keeps the responses confidential, doesn't create survey reports for work groups of fewer than five people and doesn't ask open-ended questions that could allow workers to complain about their colleagues.

"We don't want it to become a forum for personal attacks," Hill notes.

After the feedback comes in, companies should review the data, form an action plan and tell workers about what steps will be taken in response to the feedback. This can be accomplished through a letter or staff meeting.

"We tell clients, 'Don't do surveys,

when the organization thinks through what they will do with the information once they receive it."

## Insights at IBM

Using a work-life survey, IBM discovered that 27% of its workers served as caregivers for an elderly relative. In response, the company expanded its eldercare benefits. IBM, in Armonk, N.Y., hired Ceridian last year to provide eldercare management services, such as facility reviews, information gathering and visits to check up on the care recipient.

Ceridian, an information technology company, gathers workers' opinions about their work-life benefits, their workload and their ability to balance work and personal responsibilities. It also inquires about personal circumstances, such as whether workers are in dual-professional marriages, whether they are single and whether they need childcare or eldercare services. The response rate for IBM's work-life survey is about 45%, which is considered good.

Maria Ferris, manager of work-life and women's initiatives for IBM, says the survey helps IBM understand workers' needs, track demographic trends and form a strategy for addressing various work-life issues. "Over the years, the trend has been that men are more and more reporting work-life difficulties," she observes. "Work-life [balance] is an issue around the world."

In contrast, Acacia Companies gauges workers' satisfaction with their work environment, job tasks and opportunities for career advancement, but it doesn't ask about benefits or compensation. "The reason is, if you ask anyone whether they're paid enough, they're going to say, 'No.' Then what you end up with is a lot of information that's predictable," Hill explains.

The survey's response rate averages around 80%. To ensure a high response rate, the firm stresses the survey's anonymity, potential benefit to employees and support from company executives. — L.C.

**"If nothing is done with the feedback, it can really be a de-motivator."**

## Tips on conducting surveys:

1. Keep the survey short.
2. Ask specific, unbiased questions.
3. Don't ask for personally identifiable information.
4. Tell workers what you plan to do with the survey results.
5. Don't let the survey information sit unused.
6. Keep the responses confidential.
7. Frame questions in terms of trade-offs.

ident in charge of organizational development for the Ameritas Acacia Companies, a firm that distributes a satisfaction survey to its workers once every 18 months. Based in Lincoln, Neb., the firm provides insurance, annu-

unless you're prepared to respond and do something about it, because they do raise expectations," Carter asserts.

Snyder agrees: "If nothing is done with the feedback, it can really be a demotivator. The power of it comes from



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